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Critical Skills for Aspiring Leadership

Organizations are peopled with highly skilled, high-value employees who aspire to be leaders, whether of teams or departments or projects. Even current leaders, from first-line managers to the C-suite, can aspire to be better leaders so they can engender more innovation, productivity and longevity. All these aspiring leaders can develop skills to improve their leadership abilities.

While it is incumbent upon an individual to take responsibility for their own leadership development, it also behooves organizations to provide opportunities for future leaders to develop so that they're prepared to take on the mantle of a retiring workforce and be positioned to respond to a changing world and changing customer expectations.

There is more to becoming an effective leader than just earning a promotion. To be successful, aspiring leaders need to develop skills and abilities and gain experience. They also need to shift from an individual contributor mindset and develop a leadership point of view that focuses on followership, problem solving and emotional intelligence.

Understand and obtain the skills needed to be exceptional in your current role.

"If you're unsure of what it's going to take to be successful in your current role, ask your manager, and then identify opportunities to gain the skills you need," says Jean Cantey Segal, Senior Vice President of Organizational Effectiveness Consulting. "Asking the question will demonstrate that you're committed to contributing today and are interested in positioning yourself for the future."

If you don't already possess the required skills, take a class or program, volunteer to work on a company project, or even read a relevant book. In a world that is changing rapidly, the skills needed are also changing, so a mindset of continuous learning and improvement is essential.

Beyond improving your performance in your current position, demonstrating your skills will also open up new opportunities. "People are typically invited to collaborate or participate when the project leaders understand the individual's skills and recognize what they can bring to the table," says Chris Keller, Senior Vice President of Talent and Leadership Development.

Ask for challenging work assignments.

Talking to your supervisor is the first step in finding challenging and diversifying work assignments that will strengthen key skills you already possess, help you learn new skills or expose you to people with different skill-sets. Assignments can be within your current role or department or involve cross-functional teams.

"Think more broadly about where you may be able to apply your strengths in something else your organization is doing, and then offer your skills to the person leading the project, explaining how you'd like to contribute," says Chris.

Establish a mentor relationship.

A mentor is typically someone with experience in the role you're interested in, or who has the skills you're looking to develop. They provide perspective, answer questions and sometimes challenge your perceptions.

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— **CHRIS KELLER**
SVP, TALENT & LEADERSHIP
DEVELOPMENT
FCC SERVICES

As with finding challenging assignments, talking with your supervisor is one avenue of identifying an appropriate mentor. You can also simply observe others in your organization, and if you see someone who has a strength or capability that you would like to develop, ask them directly if they'd be willing to talk to you over coffee or even establish a longer term mentorship relationship. Be prepared to utilize your mentor's time wisely, establish and deliver on expectations, and be open and honest in your communication.

“Just by asking your supervisor or someone within the organization, you'll be recognized as being interested in your contributions and your long term career advancement,” says Jean.

Develop exceptional communications skills.

Effective communication with others has everything to do with your credibility, your ability to motivate your team, and to engage effectively with others.

“In any work environment, it's essential for leaders to be able to recognize other people's communications styles and needs, and learn how to communicate positively with people who have differing opinions,” says Sarah Spivey, Senior Consultant in FCC Services' Leadership Development group. “In today's environment, with the speed of change and the amount of information we're receiving constantly, it's also essential for leaders to recognize that they can't possibly have all the necessary information, so they need to be extraordinarily good listeners to support the best decisions for the organization.”

One way to develop communications skills is by role modeling: identify the one person you want to be around whatever your mood, identify what they do to make the experience enjoyable, and then set the intention of practicing that behavior in your interactions with others. Courses like “I Love Feedback” and “Crucial Conversations” and FCC Services' LDP programs also focus on developing essential communications skills.

You can also ask colleagues, friends and family for feedback about your communications skills and style. Or, ask others for advice: if you know someone who deals well with challenging situations and you're facing one, ask them how they would handle it; in written communication, ask someone you respect to read your drafts; if you have a presentation to deliver, ask skilled presenters the tools they're using.

Become a leader outside of work.

“If someone wants to develop their leadership capability, there's no better way to gain the necessary skills than by actually doing it,” says Chris.

Community leadership development opportunities come in many forms, from serving on a non-profit board of directors to chairing a volunteer committee to coaching a child's sports team to helping family or friends with a project. You can also identify opportunities from your own passions: for example, if you're an avid golfer, offer to plan the next tournament.

Know and take advantage of your greatest strengths.

“No one distinguishes themselves by being average,” says Chris. “By identifying their strengths and then developing them further, individuals can become recognized for them, which can lead to greater opportunity.”

To identify or clarify your strengths, books such as Gallup's “StrengthsFinder” can help hone your thinking. Individual assessments and 360 degree feedback can also reveal sometimes hidden strengths. Asking peers, leaders or even family members what they see you doing well can also be helpful, while also letting them know that they're important enough to you for you to ask the question.

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Understand what it means to be an effective follower.

A good follower is willing to express their thoughts in a candid and impactful way, provide their insights and offer their creativity. They should be challenging without being derogatory, and be willing to take direction. Being a good follower also requires managing yourself and your time effectively, being competent in your skills and delivering on what's expected of you.

Everyone in an organization is a follower at some level, including the CEO who follows the lead of the board and customers. When a leader moves into a followership role, they need to adjust their communication approach and step back to let someone lead.

"This is where the servant leadership mindset comes into play, recognizing that no matter what your role, whether CEO or front-line staff, you're one piece of the organization, serving your mission, your customers and your business," says Chris.

"Developing the diverse skills that aspiring leaders need is helped by being willing to be vulnerable and ask other people for help or advice or input," says Jean. "From talking to a supervisor about work assignments to asking peers for feedback on communication, the people around us have a wealth of insights to help us develop. Combined with maintaining a mindset of continuous learning, aspiring leaders can access the resources they need to achieve their leadership goals."

For more information about FCC Services leadership development opportunities, contact Chris Keller at 303.721.3270 or by emailing Chris.Keller@FCCServices.com.